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ABSTRACT

To decrease negative behaviors in American Indian/Alaska Native students, teachers should help children understand, care about, and act upon core virtues such as courage, generosity, humility, honesty, fortitude, and patience. Integrating core virtues throughout the curriculum through stories, class discussions, role-playing, and critical evaluation about why virtues are important for harmonious relationships is natural to Native ways of learning. Nature is also conducive to understanding core virtues among Native students. When children understand how virtues play into all subjects and learning processes, they begin to comprehend the reciprocal relationships that surround them. When Native children are not required to renounce their cultural heritage, school achievement improves markedly. Native families that value the spiritual aspects of traditions bring the core virtues to life. When families are impaired, a sense of family can be created in the school. Native American methods of child management are one of the most effective systems of positive discipline ever developed. Perhaps, with new priorities in teaching and learning, it can work again. (Contains 23 references) (TD)

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(Don Trent Jacobs)

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Shifting Attention from "Discipline Problems" to "Virtue Awareness" in American Indian and Alaska Native Education

Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs)

There is a risk in using many of the terms commonly applied to this subject. Phrases like *classroom management, child discipline,* or *behavioral issues* can mislead by focusing too much on children's compliance with rules and too little on their developing relationships. This Digest suggests a different parlance to use when trying to decrease negative behaviors that prevent American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children from contributing to healthy and peaceful classroom environments. Rather than thinking about behaviors per se, the author recommends ways to help children understand, care about, and act upon core virtues (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 1997). *Core virtues* are meant herein to represent universally acknowledged attributes such as courage, generosity, humility, honesty, fortitude, and patience; they are different from *values*, which may differ from culture to culture.

Integrating Virtues into Other Learning

It is not enough to treat core virtues as a separate area of study. Instead, teachers need to develop and work from a holistic perspective, weaving virtue awareness continually into all aspects of teaching and curriculum (Jacobs & Jacobs-Spencer, 2001). When students don't grasp this larger picture of interconnections, it is easy for them to align virtues with misguided values. For example, Native youth too often attempt to demonstrate courage through acts of violence.[1] Such a misinterpretation of courage, an important virtue in most Indigenous philosophies, may help explain why levels of negative risk-taking behaviors such as fighting and substance abuse continue to be higher for AI/AN youth than for the general population (Clarke, 2002).

For courage, generosity, or humility to positively guide behavior, such virtues must be considered in a variety of relevant contexts through stories, class discussions, role-playing, and critical evaluation about how virtues play out in life and why they are important for harmonious relationships. Unlike most character education approaches, which tend either to be authoritarian or to treat virtues superficially (e.g., the common "virtue of the month" approach), such a constant integration of virtue awareness into all curriculum is natural to AI/AN ways of learning (Jacobs, 1998). Young people do not learn to hunt or weave without also learning the relationship of these activities to generosity, patience, humility, respect, and so forth. Even the traditional names of particular places on Indian lands often have wisdom stories associated with them (Basso, 1996).

When children understand how virtues play into all subjects and learning processes, they begin to comprehend the reciprocal relationships that surround them. In turn, they may begin to seek inner meaning, exploring their experiences in light of the virtues. Without such insights, young people may remain frustrated by uninvestigated values and doctrines that seem unassociated with their developing integrity and character.

Thinking about thinking. For virtue awareness to be authentic, that is, not just about following rules, teachers must give students continual opportunities to think about how they come to certain conclusions. This is especially important for AI/AN children. "Learning about the nature of self-deception is a key aspect of Indigenous preparation for learning," Cajete explained (1994, p. 225). When a student is not fully engaged in learning and acts out in negative ways, self-deception and its irrationalities are usually involved. Full engagement requires awareness about one's beliefs, intuitions, and past experiences as these relate to making sense of the world (Schoenfeld 1987, pp. 189-215). When emotions or actions become negative, teachers can help students by simply asking them to consider what fears led them to their assumptions, what authority figure determined their preconceptions, or even what words they use (Jacobs, 1998).

Understanding Virtues in Context

Bergstrom, Miller, and Peacock (2003) observed American Indian adolescents who identified strongly with Indian culture and were able to find and walk "The Good Path." That is, they had come to appreciate the core virtues in ways that remained obscure to those who lack this sense of identity. Sanchez-Way and Johnson (2000) synthesized research that indicated a relationship between cultural identification and vulnerability to drug use. They described Indian culture as including many opportunities to transmit underlying spiritual values to the young. Tharp's research also showed that when children were not required to renounce their cultural heritage, school achievement improved markedly (1989).

Beauvais and Oetting (1999) wrote about the importance of families that provide a stable environment for youth. They concluded that Indian families, not schools, should be the primary focus of substance abuse prevention because when families value the spiritual aspects of traditions, then the core virtues come to life.

Awareness of relationships and the importance of virtues in them reduces the risk that children will fall into negative behaviors such as substance abuse (Fisher, Storck, & Bacon, 1999). However, although an emphasis on families may ideally result in the greatest preventive gains, this is not always possible in seriously impaired families. An experiment at Loneman Elementary School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation illustrates how a sense of family and constant virtue awareness can nonetheless be brought into the school environment. Sandra K. Blacksmith, one of the teachers involved in the project, had this to say:

> Focusing on the virtues and the extended family concept was the most rewarding and successful experience of my teaching career. I found my students becoming responsible, competent, caring, considerate, watchful, protective and using critical thinking skills daily. I watched the natural leadership talents of boys and girls blossom. They were looking toward each other to solve their differences. This system takes time. You must let children take the lead. You must be a facilitator. (2001)

Understanding Virtues in Association with Nature

A weakness of many current character education programs is an underlying assumption that virtues are human and therefore

[1] See research on Indian juvenile gangs at http://www.csus.edu/ssis/cdcps/nativegang.htm

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separate from nature (Jacobs, 2002). As Cohen (1990) explains, sometimes nature is the best teacher. Many children gain a passion for justice, beauty, and cooperation when they discover (often at an intuitive level) the interconnectedness of all life—the spiritual power that abides in landscapes, rivers, and wildlife (Cohen, 1990). Traditional stories often feature the teachings of animals who steadfastly practice generosity, courage, patience, or other virtues.

Beyond the collective wisdom of Indigenous people, research studies have also confirmed how vital a role nature can play in the building of character. A recent meta-analysis looked at the effectiveness of "wilderness therapy" programs by assessing behavioral and emotional symptoms of 858 clients before and after their involvement in one of the eight outdoor behavioral health care programs studied. The study showed statistically significant improvements in behavior, in the reconciling of family relations, and in helping to address more serious underlying issues that drive problem behavior in youth (Russell, 2001). This healing effect of natural outdoor systems may be especially useful for AI/AN students, whose cultural heritages are likely to embrace nature as an integrated part of human existence.

Building Self-Esteem in Relation to Virtuous Character

Knowing one's self as possessing virtues is a requirement for a spiritually fulfilling existence, according to Coopersmith (1967). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1994) agree and show in *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* how traditional Native educational practices address four bases of individual self-esteem: (1) belonging nurtured in a cultural milieu, (2) competence ensured by opportunities for mastery, (3) power fostered by encouraging the expression of independence, and (4) generosity as the preeminent virtue.

Questioning Hegemony and *Worldview*

Virtues bring harmony to relationships when students see the practicality in living as though "we are all related." When adults contradict this spiritual imperative, children naturally become suspicious. For this reason, a critical awareness of hegemony may be important. As other scholars have noted, when the dominant culture's assumptions remain unchallenged intellectually, minority students often find ways to challenge them emotionally or behaviorally. McEwan explained, "Disempowered people resist their domination" (2000, p. 127). Likewise, Erickson observed, "Consistent patterns of refusal to learn in school can be seen as a form of resistance to a stigmatized ethnic or social class identity. . . . Students can refuse to accept the negative identity by refusing to learn" (1993, p. 43). McEwan (2000) also states that "the struggles for power that occur throughout the educational system cannot be divorced from the painfully arbitrary nature of who has and does not have a voice in our society" (p. 125).

Conclusion

According to Joan F. Goodman, "If children are to become critical thinkers, tolerant of competing interests and loyalties, and strong, independent moral agents, they must be active participants in moral decisions" (2002, p. 35). The idea that all skills and knowledge should reflect virtues and be used to care for self and others is inherent in many AI/AN traditional views on teaching and learning. To study academic subjects without incorporating virtues and caring is to do something without purpose. Having a life purpose has been found to be predictive of positive life adaptation (Kumpfer, 1999) and, in the worldview of many Native cultures, "one of life's most important developmental tasks is discovering one's own life purpose" (Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000, p. 44). Teachers would serve their students well by learning to help them in this discovery process.

In *Control Theory in the Classroom*, Glasser argues for ways to allow youth to exert power over their lives. He says that discipline never really succeeds if it does not recognize the universal need of all persons to be free and in control of themselves (1986). In nurturing students toward responsible independence, it may be wise to remember that the legacy of Indigenous cultures supports a balance of autonomy and independence. Brendtro, widely recognized as an international authority on peer cultures and child management, states this clearly:

> Native American philosophies of child management represent what is perhaps the most effective system of positive discipline ever developed. These approaches emerged from cultures where the central purpose of life was the education and empowerment of children. Modern child development research is only now reaching the point where this holistic approach can be understood, validated and replicated. (1994, p. 35)

Addressing the goals for "virtue education" that have been described in this article may be one way to understand and replicate this holistic approach, which worked for thousands of years. Perhaps, with new priorities in teaching and learning, it can work again.

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